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THE TUMULT DIES

PHYLLIS WYATT BROWN

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THE TUMULT DIES

BY

PHYLLIS WYATT BROWN

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My dear Mr Rozum

This story was written by my wife for a magazine of general circulation, shortly after the bank run of June, 1932. In my judgment, the time was not opportune for its publication and it was withheld. Some officers, who read the manuscript, believed it would interest men who went through the run, and suggested it be printed for distribution in the bank. To you, as one of us who did his part in those exciting days, I take pleasure in presenting a copy.

E G Brown

To Fred A Rozum

THE TUMULT DIES

THE First National Bank of Chicago opened its doors to the public the day the battle of Gettysburg began in 1863.

The significant or dramatic events in the life of the institution during those seventy years are told and told again, among the members of the organization, with the same zest with which men once related the Sagas. Occasionally, at a dinner party, the wife of some one of the First National officers may overhear her husband in the midst of a monologue, "It was the summer of 1868 ------Lyman J. Gage had just come to us as cashier from The Merchants Loan and Trust ------we decided," and she catches on the face of some listening stranger, who does not understand the solidarity of that "we," a look of surprise that the narrator is so amazingly well-preserved a man.

It is part of the Saga, that when the little, Florentine building of the First National Bank at the southwest corner of State and Washington Streets, which was thought so knowing, so sophisticated, with its "balustraded portico in cut-off and pediment from the cornice," was swept by the Chicago Fire in 1871, and part of

the walls fell in, and the fanciful iron-work was twisted and melted; the safes and vaults withstood the heat of the flames, and not a security, or note, or valuable paper, or any of the bank's books was destroyed.

The variety of the First National's customers is part of the Saga, different races and creeds and colors, many men of many minds, to whom their savings and investments represent, not the filthy lucre, in which the cold-blooded banker, of public portraiture, is supposed to deal, but a medium of exchange which stands for some of life's most vital necessities----the education of children, the succour of the sick, the care of old age, the ability to travel, to seek beauty, to live happily, to die decently. Bread? Yes. Bread and Roses, too.

The gypsies, whose trade the First National Bank has had for more than fifty years, are part of the Saga, splashing the white walls of the lobby with a fresco of rainbow color, as they come in throngs to deposit the gold from their money-belts, and sit casually on the marble floors, discussing their affairs. So are the Chinese part of the Saga, with their abacuses under their arms. As a rule, their word is as good as their

bond. That may be due to inherent honour, or, as a high member of a tong, who undertook for a compatriot the immediate payment of a debt, once disclosed to one of the First National men, it may be due to fear of the Hatchet Man.

The Saga is exciting, as any epic of a long-established business concern is exciting. It unrolls like a panorama, good times and bad times, the flush years, when money was plenty, when the Stock Exchange was soaring, when people were "sitting on top of the world," when the First National was generally considered too conservative, too cautious, when the president used to walk about the institution, and say over, and over, and over again, "Remember, boys, what goes up has got to come down!"---- and the panic years, 1893 and 1907 and 1921, which come into retrospective conversations of a financial nature, as critical illnesses are mentioned with lowered voice, in a family chronicle.

There is the old tale of the man who appeared at a grille in the Foreign Exchange Department, leveled a revolver, and said quietly, "Jesus Christ has ordered me to draw out fifty thousand dollars." To which the teller replied as quietly, while he pressed the police buzzer, "We do not

attend to His business in this department. If you will go to Window X., they will take care of you." And they did take care of him, poor fellow, in a lunatic asylum!

Nor is anyone in the organization likely to forget the story of S., one of the vice-presidents. He was at his desk, with his brother-officers at work around him, one morning, not long ago, when he noticed a man standing nearby, who seemed rather at a loss. S. went up to him at once.

"Are you looking for some one? Can I do anything for you?" he asked.

"I have some business to talk over," the stranger answered.

They sat down together. The customer pulled his chair close, and drew out a long envelope of papers. When S. leaned forward to take them, he saw that in the midst of the papers, was a revolver, and that his visitor's hand was on the trigger.

"Keep your hands on your knees," was the hold-up man's order. "Don't touch the police buzzer. Go with me pronto to a teller's cage, and guarantee this check for three thousand dollars, or I'll shoot."

S's knees were shaky. But he sparred for time. "The check is forged," he complained. "You can't cash it."

"Oh yes I can, if you say it's all right. And if you don't say it's all right, you're a dead man," was the rejoinder.

S. continued his objections. They talked and talked and talked, while the palms on the ledge outside the window stirred gently in the breeze, and the machine of S's stenographer clicked reassuringly, not ten feet away; while the light streamed under the high arches of the familiar lobby, and the men from the next desks came and went, conscious only that S. was deep in conversation with a customer. If only one of them would pass near enough to catch a whispered word! More than one of them, as it proved later, had started toward S., during his conference, and seeing him occupied, had politely withdrawn! After a tortured fifteen minutes, a bank messenger left some mail on S's desk. "Get help!" the victim said, very low, to the boy.

"You spoke to him," the visitor accused S. "Only about the mail," S. replied. "I didn't dare say anything else."

But the man's suspicions were roused. "This won't do," he snarled. "We've been too long about this job already. Come on."

They started across the floor of the bank, toward the tellers' cages. The innocent-looking bundle of papers still pressed S's side. How he longed for the help he thought the messenger must surely have summoned by now! The astute boy, fearing that the intruder would shoot if he saw a uniformed policeman approaching, had delayed to get one of the plain-clothes men, who now came up from behind. S. dodged back of a pillar. The intruder ran. The plain clothes man ran after, firing low, mindful of innocent bystanders; and in an alley, outside the building, he caught his man. As for S., he says he has sworn off going to moving pictures. He says they are not as exciting as his own life!

In June 1932, a chapter foreseen as a possibility for more than a year, and most carefully prepared for during all that time, but still entirely new in the annals of the institution, was added to the Saga. We had a run on the Savings department of the bank.

How much it was caused by the failure of some of the outlying banks, and the reception by the

First National of many of the "scared" funds from those closed institutions; how much it was inspired or augmented by Communist activities; how much its sources lay in the ignorance that can hardly be expected, after the late, tragic days in the profession of finance, to distinguish between a soap bubble and the Rock of Gibraltar; how much it had its being in sheer, piteous, poignant panic, fed and nourished on the wildest rumours and reports; no one will ever know. Nor did any one at the First National greatly care. The First National was not concerning itself with suppositions. The first harried, hurried, anxious vanguard of savings depositors arrived to make withdrawals as soon as the doors opened on Thursday morning. From that time on, all through the increasing hysteria and panic in the growing crowds on Friday and Saturday, the First National was putting its back into comforting and upholding those who wanted to leave their funds, if they could only be convinced that their deposits were safe, and into paying those who wanted their money, just as fast as human hands could pay it.

The work done by the First National organization during the run, both in the speed

with which payments were made, and in the sympathy and conviction with which reassurance was given, remains a miracle.

That Thursday morning, the First National Bank had on hand, the greatest volume of cash in the seventy years of its history. It had huge volumes of United States Government bonds, that could be converted into cash at a moment's notice, and it had many, many more millions of dollars of paper that was eligible for re-discount at the Federal Reserve Bank, though the First National did not borrow a penny from the Federal Reserve.

In addition, as soon as the knowledge of the run spread over the country, offers of large loans and deposits from every part of the United States, from banks, companies and from individuals, began to pour in. These offers of financial help which was not needed, were gratefully refused, but the spiritual support supplied by those who so quickly rallied to the First National in a time of stress will never be forgotten.

Given this financial strength, there yet remained the problem of getting the actual cash into the hands of owners, who were constantly defeating their own ends. On that first morn-

ing, the teller at one window could not pay for twenty minutes because each customer who reached the grille, after a tortuous progress in agony of spirit along the line, was snatched back by the mob into the milling whirlpool before the brief business necessary to withdrawal could be transacted. Nor could those who had finally received their money, get out of the jam.

A woman, who drew a hundred and fifty dollars, slipped it into the cover of her bank book and lost it in the crowd. Another, who took out eight thousand, discovered when she reached home that her pocket had been picked of every penny of it! The only instance in which anybody profited by the density of the horde, was that of a customer who withdrew five hundred dollars, dropped it on the floor in front of a cage, missed it three hours later, returned to look for it, and because the throng was so thick that nobody had been able to see the floor in those three hours, found the money exactly where it had been lost!

That was in the beginning. Immediately the affair began to be systematized. Signs were placed, asking customers to leave the bank as soon as they had transacted their business. The

First National police force was joined by many city officers. Everybody went to work to bring order out of the chaos of white-faced, struggling human beings, who filled completely the two hundred and sixteen feet by forty feet of floor space of each lobby.

An enormous man was observed leaning heavily against one of the temporary cages, upon which three lines of desperate people were converging. The cage swayed. If it had gone down, all of the money in it, some millions at that time, would have been within reach of the multitude. Asked to get into line, the big man angrily refused, whereupon three policemen formed a flying wedge and shunted him to the end of the queue.

The same sergeant who told this tale heard a woman in the very center of the horde screaming, "Officer, officer, I'm dying!" She looked to him suspiciously healthy. "Many," he commented, "were playing those pranks to get up in front and get their cash before the other fellow. So I just said to her, 'I'll get you out of the crush, all right. But you'd better go home, madam. If you're dying, you won't need any money!' "

A great door had been cut by night many months earlier, for use in just such an emergency. It had been so cleverly concealed by marble slabs that its existence was known to only a dozen people. This was thrown open to provide a quick exit. Ropes were stretched in the lower lobbies. One of the vice-presidents, who had had experience in handling crowds at golf tournaments, advised that one rope would be dangerous, as the horde was apt to press against it with such force that those in front might be seriously cut. Accordingly a three-rope system was put into operation, with the urgent throng nearest the street held behind one barrier, and an empty space maintained between them, and the "bull-pens." These were roped areas into which customers were admitted in groups, instructed as to which paying tellers' cages to go to, and released, at intervals, to join the now orderly lines on the floor of the bank. This method did away automatically with idle spectators who had been circulating through the Savings department and whose curiosity was not sufficient to keep them herded into one inclosure. Into the groups in the "bull-pens," old people and women who had brought little children with

them, were taken first. The ropes (life-lines in the eyes of many of the poor, frightened people behind them) were manned by policemen and sometimes by the high officers of the organization.

Some of the policemen kept up a constant campaign of mingled orders and reassurance. "Now this is just a game," announced one of them, a big Scotchman. "The fairer you play it, the sooner you'll get in and get your money. The first man that tries to dodge under this rope, before we lift it and order him through, gets thrown back into that first division and has to start all over again. Will that tall, good-looking lady in the white hat, just hold this end of the rope for me?- - - - -That's it. Sure you wouldn't push a woman, would you? Now remember, it's a game. But there's one difference between this and all other games. *We know who is going to win. The bank!*"- - - - - A mocking voice called, "Aw, listen to the Scotchman!"- - - - - Quick as a flash, the policeman shouted back, "Yes, I *am* a Scotchman, and you'll not see any other in this crowd. *We're* too canny! We know our money is safe here, and we're not going to draw it out and lose our July first interest!"

The campaign to convince and comfort anxious customers was going on all over the bank. Up on the eighth floor, the chief operator of the telephone switchboard addressed her girls. "We must work faster," she told them, "than we have ever worked before. If there is delay, anyone calling may believe the rumours, and think the bank is closed. Then too, your voices are the first contact that the person at the other end of the wire has with the First National. You must speak more quietly, more considerately, than is usually necessary. Let everybody know from your tone, the moment they hear you, that business is going on just as it always does."

On Thursday, the switchboard operators turned every inquiry over to the officers of the institution. But on Friday, knowing how busy the officers were, the telephone girls began to reassure people themselves and then to ask if those who called wished to be connected with an officer as well. More often than not, the person who had requested to know if the bank was closed, said immediately after the girl had stated the facts, "I knew there was nothing in the report," and hung up the receiver.

A teamster told the operator who answered him that he had been driving through the Loop with two loads for the city, when an acquaintance, John Johnson, called to him from the pavement, "Did you know the First National is closed?" ---- "Hell, no!" the teamster replied, and ran, with his heart in his mouth, to a telephone. "I had to call you up and see. I've got a wife and four kids, and everything I have in the world is in your bank." The girl explained the situation to him, to his great relief. But after she had assured him of the safety of his savings, he had apparently formed so good an opinion of her judgment that he put to her another question. "Say," he went on, "when I meet that Johnson, what will I say to him?"

"Don't say anything," advised the oracle. "Just punch him in the nose!"

"That," replied the teamster, comfort sounding in his tone, "is just what I'll do; and thank you like hell, lady!"

A woman who asked if the bank was out of business and received the usual reply, remarked, "I thought when I heard the rumour, it was just the working classes, trying to stir up trouble!" ---- "I didn't remind her," com-

mented the telephone operator, "that we girls belong to the working classes!" And she laughed gaily, without the least resentment, either of the woman's disparagement, or of the fact that the operators had answered between fifteen and twenty thousand calls a day during the run, as against five or six thousand normally.

Downstairs, telegrams poured in. They were all the same. Four words. "Is my money safe?" Every one of those telegrams was answered within five minutes of its reception, "The First National absolutely sound and doing business as usual. Your money safe."

On the first day of the run, all the employees worked without any break for lunch. After that, a noonday meal was served to them at their posts.

Paying tellers in the Savings department who were so weary with the terrific strain they were undergoing, that they were ordered out of the cages, to lie down and rest, struggled up before the time allotted them was over, crazy to be back on the job. And when the chief cashier directed the general tellers and bookkeepers who were making up their figures, to stop work at eleven at night, the order was flatly disobeyed and all

worked on. For all of these, rooms were taken at a nearby hotel, and they were urged to go to them for the next night; but most of them, especially the clearing tellers, boys in many cases in their early twenties, worked from eight o'clock Friday morning until midnight Saturday with but a few hours' rest.

The officers of the Savings department were doing yeoman service on many fronts. Kipling's specification for attaining the earth:

> "If you can keep your head when all about you
> Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
> If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
> But make allowance for their doubting too - - - - -"

might have been written expressly in description of those officers and their employees.

A customer, who had been out of work for a year and a half, and who had seven hundred dollars on deposit with which to feed his wife, his four children, and himself, until he might get a job again, came to one of the officers for advice. "If I lose that money," he said piteously, "they will all starve." But after the talk was over, he left his deposit.

A little old woman, who had a savings account of three hundred dollars, just enough to carry

her until she could enter a home for the aged, came seven times to one of the vice-presidents; and seven times he did his best to assuage her fears. She kept her money in the bank, and on Monday morning, after the tumult and the shouting had died, the vice-president saw her pathetic figure wending its way to him, once more. "I came back to thank you," she told him, "only I can't thank you enough, so I'll just say I'm sorry I bothered you so much!"

"Some of them took our efforts to help them in a different way," this vice-president said later. "One man, who decided to leave his deposit, after I had discussed the matter with him, called to me as he went out, 'If this bank closes, I'll come back and shoot you!'" Not all of the customers could be convinced, for, as Thoreau says, "It takes two to tell truth, one to speak and one to hear," but it is estimated that of those alarmed depositors who talked to officers of the institution, ninety per cent went away reassured. Obviously, the officers could not talk to all of the thousands who composed the horde. But the bank personnel had unexpected help from many quarters.

One man went among the crowd, with an open bank book in his hand. "Look here," he kept calling. "Look at this! I've got sixteen hundred dollars on deposit in this bank, and I wouldn't draw a penny of it!"

A customer waiting his turn to make a withdrawal, near a teller's grille, overheard a bank employee asking the teller how much currency he wished brought to the cage. The teller stipulated seven million. "Is that all?" inquired the messenger. "I can just as well bring ten." At which the listening customer, dropped out of his place in the queue, and went home. Still another depositor, waved his arms in the air and shouted. "I don't want my money. I didn't come here to get my money. I came to put more in!" And in another part of the bank, a well-known business man was gathering groups of fifteen or twenty people about him and making speeches to them on the subject of the reliability and integrity of the First.

The president of the bank, walking through the institution on one of the busiest days, heard a small voice behind him, "Will you please tell me where I can make a deposit?" He turned to face a young couple. "My name is

Traylor," he told them. "It takes a good deal of courage to make a deposit, in the midst of a raging mob such as this one. We have perfect confidence in our institution, but that you should have the same confidence is very gratifying." The boy laughed. "Why, Mr. Traylor," he said, as if he, in his turn, were doing the reassuring, "*We're* not afraid!"

Many people who had come to the bank without any knowledge of the run, to make their ordinary withdrawals, or to cash checks, or do other business, stayed to make deposits. Many asked to be allowed to remain to address the crowd or to mingle in it and give such comfort as they could. Many helped the police and employees to take care of women who fainted. One of these loyal friends made his way to a vice-president, through one of the worst jams. "There's someone lying over there by the stairs," he informed him, "who I think is dead." When they hurried to the spot, they found an apparently lifeless man stretched full-length on the marble floor. After one of the First National nurses, the officer and the Good Samaritan had worked over the patient, whose trouble seems to have been, pure, unadulterated fright, he was revived, given his money and sent home.

A family, who bought up the few shares of First National stock available, took pains to send to the teller who attended to the account, a notice of the purpose for which the money was to be used, in order that their intention might not be misunderstood. A distracted husband, bursting with apologies, arrived at a grille to put back the currency which his wife had drawn from their joint account without his knowledge the day before.

They tell the tale of a woman who, finding herself the possessor of a very large sum of currency, which she had so little expected to be able to collect that she made no provision for carrying it, slipped off her bloomers while she stood in the main lobby of the bank; wrapped her money in them; and took her departure.

Then there was the man who had withdrawn many thousands, who brought them back the day after the run, and demanded in no uncertain terms, his interest. Politely informed that he could not be paid six-months' interest on a sum which had been withdrawn within the six-months period, he continued his demands. When he became abusive and insolent, he was told that his account was not desired, whereupon

he immediately reopened it, muttering that any bank that didn't want money must be in an awfully sound position.

But there is another story of quite a different character about the six months' interest. A customer who had intended to withdraw two thousand dollars, all she had in her account, found, when she reached home, that she had three one-thousand dollar bills, two of which had stuck together, unnoticed in the confusion, by the teller. After the run was over, the woman brought back her two thousand for re-deposit. The one thousand, she returned to the bank. She was the only person among the throngs who made withdrawals before July first who received interest on her money for the six months previous.

On Saturday, one of the vice-presidents, who was working at the ropes, felt someone trying to dodge under. He stooped to make a grab for the intruder, and found himself looking into the laughing face of S., one of the vice-presidents of another Loop bank, which had been going through the same mill as the First National. These two officers of different financial institutions allude to themselves sometimes, as

"The Siamese Twins." They stood together, swept by the sympathy and affection of a devoted business friendship, born of the years in which those two banks have met many a struggle shoulder to shoulder; and S. said, "Well, our run is about over. I came to see how yours is getting on, and I see the crowd is thinning rapidly."

About twelve o'clock of that day, the president of the First National made an impromptu talk to the jam of people outside the Savings Department.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, "my name is Traylor, the chief executive of this bank at this time. Naturally, I am delighted to see so many of our customers here, but I am really sorry that they are afraid of me. I don't blame you. So much has been happening in the banking business in Cook County, within the last two or three years, that I suspect if I were not really familiar with the situation, I would be frightened, too. But may I say this to you? We have been in business almost seventy years. We have been criticized many times, but this is a place where you all have kept your money, a place to which you have looked for accommodations.

"We have been conservative, and for that reason, we are in a position to pay our depositors their money. We are going to open at nine o'clock on Monday morning, and we are going to do that right straight along. Let me tell you what has been going on. I have been getting letters, telling me of the organization of runs that were going to be made on the Loop banks in Chicago, and particularly on this bank. I don't blame people for being worried, but if you will talk to the Federal Reserve Bank, and if you will talk to the Governor of the Federal Reserve Board at Washington, and if you will talk to people who know what our condition is, they will tell you we are sound!

"I want to ask your co-operation to the end that we may work as easily as possible. We want you to have your money, and then you can feel that we are a good, safe bank; and you can bring it back again, and we will keep it for you until you want it again."

There the speech ended and the crowd cheered. Many of them turned as soon as the words died away and went out into the June sunshine of the Loop with their belief regained, that there are still sound institutions left to cling to in a troubled and suffering world.

Long before closing time on that day, the bank - - - littered with papers and refuse, dirty, disheveled, manned by employees white-faced with physical weariness, but happy - - - - - - was absolutely quiet. The First National's job of reassurance was done.

That was on Saturday. On Monday morning, one of the gypsy bands arrived. They had heard in New York state, the report that the First National Bank of Chicago was going to close, and they had driven in their strange, old, clanking cars, by day and by night, without stop, without food, without sleep, to get their money.

They looked like the company that troops down the mountain-side into the Pass, in the Third Act of "Carmen" - - - skirts fluted like inverted morning glories, and more variously colored, ear-rings clinking, hair flying, eyes flashing. The men, some of them in knee-breeches, with bright scarfs thrown over the shoulder, and great slouch hats, gathered in knots to discuss the order of the leader that the tribal money be withdrawn. Black John was there, and Rose Vostock and Washo Bill. They took their money. But they had taken it also, in

1907 and in 1914 at the outbreak of the World War and on their next migration, in the Spring, they had re-deposited it.

As they streamed out, under the high marble arch of the main lobby, like a flock of brilliant birds, one of them ran back. "I didn't want to take out my money," he confided to the chief cashier. "We have to obey our leader. But don't worry. We'll bring it back!"

The stress is over, now. Confidence is restored. People are returning with the money they were worried about. For days after the run, the bank was filled with congratulatory friends.

Yes, those June days are past history, like the Chicago Fire, and the panics of 1893 and 1907 and 1921, and like Black Tuesday of 1929.

But the First National men will be telling stories of those June days for years to come. "That," they will say, "happened when we had the run on the bank in 1932."

It has become part - - - - - - - a proud part - - - of the Saga.

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